

Sacramento Business Journal - July 3, 2000

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Leading Stories

From the Sacramento Business Journal

Rocky road in Lincoln

Teichert trips on old ammo site

Celia Lamb Staff Writer

A plume of contaminated groundwater seeping from an old explosives testing site has thrown more fuel into an already heated controversy about a plan by Teichert Inc. to mine gravel some four miles north of Lincoln.

Representatives of the Placer Group Sierra Club and Western Placer Citizens for an Agricultural and Rural Environment said they're concerned about the environmental impacts of Teichert's plans to dig gravel pits about 2,000 feet from the plume, which contains perchlorate and nitrates. Both chemicals are potential health hazards.

Opponents of the gravel mine worry that mining activities will alter the flow of the contaminated groundwater, sending it into the gravel pits. Teichert plans to pump water flooding the gravel pits into nearby Coon Creek.

Spokesmen for Teichert and Alpha Explosives, which owns the land where the contamination originated, said they don't believe Teichert's proposed activities could alter the flow of the contamination plume under Alpha Explosive's land.

"To the best of my knowledge, the Teichert project won't have an effect on the flow of the groundwater under this location," said Randy Sater, manager of aggregate resource development for Teichert.

A massive, five-volume draft environmental impact report released by the Placer County Planning Department in March 1999 contained only a one-paragraph mention of the contamination problem at Alpha Explosives.

"The county didn't know until January 1999 about the contamination identified by the regional Water Quality Control Board," said county spokeswoman Anita Yoder. "By that time the draft EIR was pretty far along in the process."

The county has requested a second environmental impact report for the Teichert Project, addressing the issue of contaminants under Alpha Explosives. Sater said he expected the report would be complete within

a month.

Time bomb: Alpha Explosives' 22.9-acre parcel lies within a 3,455-acre site owned by Teichert Inc. Alpha Explosives uses its parcel for explosives distribution. Teichert has proposed mining and processing gravel on 1,000 acres northeast of Alpha Explosives.

The Alpha Explosives site was a cattle ranch until Hercules Powder Co. began leasing the property from Coon Creek Cattle Co. in 1963. Hercules produced explosive gel mixes and tested them on the property. The company burned mixes that didn't explode and disposed of spilled mixes in an evaporation pond. Between 1964 and 1978, Hercules used perchlorate.

Langner and Falconi Construction Inc. of Lincoln bought Alpha Explosives in 1983. Hercules shared the Coon Creek Cattle Co. land with Alpha Explosives, which took over the lease in 1989 and bought the property in 1998.

Brad Langner, secretary and treasurer of Alpha Explosives, said he had known since 1989 that the property was contaminated with nitrates. He did not know nitrates had entered groundwater 100 feet below until 1995, when Teichert commissioned an environmental assessment of the property by Harding Lawson Associates.

Alpha Explosives set about developing a remediation plan to deal with the nitrate contamination, but the plan had to be set aside in late 1998 when the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board discovered perchlorate in the groundwater.

The regional water board had requested perchlorate-testing on the site based on findings of perchlorate at other explosives sites in the past, said Amy Terrell, a water resources control engineer with the regional water board.

"We had no reason to suspect there was perchlorate here ... because we had never used it," Langner said.

In late December 1998 or early January 1999, the county received a call from a regional water quality board about the perchlorate discovery, Yoder said.

The county decided to have Jones & Stokes finish the environmental impact report on the Teichert project and submit a second report later, dealing with the perchlorate issue in more depth.

"We actually learned about the perchlorate through the EIR process," Sater said.

Toxic issues: Katie Green, a member of the Placer Group Sierra Club, said she thought Lincoln-area residents haven't received enough notice about the groundwater contaminants

Site studies and correspondence related to Alpha Explosives have been available in an open public file at the regional water board, but Green said she and her neighbors didn't learn of the contamination until this year.

"What I want to know is what agency, at what point, has the ethical responsibility, if not the legal responsibility to tell people about this," Green said.

"The thing that we're very disturbed about is that this was not brought to light," agreed Mary Ann Hutchinson of Western Placer Citizens for an Agricultural and Rural Environment.

The regional water board is responsible for regulating groundwater contamination limits. Terrell said her agency notifies the county when contaminants are found to be heading toward wells. The county then holds the responsibility for public notice, if such notice is deemed appropriate.

County spokeswoman Yoder said the county staff had probably received notice of nitrate contamination over the years, but the presence of nitrates in agricultural areas is not uncommon and did not draw much attention.

In addition, the nearest domestic and agricultural wells are 3,000 feet away. If the groundwater continues to move at about 16 feet per year it would take more than 287 years to reach those wells.

The nearest point the contamination could enter the environment is a point on Coon Creek 1,200 feet away, but groundwater in the area flows away from the creek.

Alpha Explosives is working with the regional water board to develop a treatment plan to clean up the groundwater contaminants. They're currently conducting a pilot study to test remediation techniques, Langner said.

Alpha Explosives has spent close to \$300,000 for cleanup studies, and Langner expects the company will have to shell out another \$600,000 to finish the job.

Langner dismisses concerns that Teichert's activities might change the flow of the plume. Coon Creek lies between and at a higher elevation than Alpha Explosives and the proposed mining pits.

"It's such a stretch to think the pit will draw the water back uphill," Langner said. "These people are so fanatical to shut the Teichert plant down they're grabbing at straws."

Peanut-sized problem: Perchlorate reduces thyroid hormone production in people exposed to high levels or low levels over a long period of time. Technology to detect perchlorate at low levels wasn't developed until April 1997.

The chemical gained notoriety in the Sacramento region soon after when perchlorate from GenCorp Aerojet's facility at Rancho Cordova was found in municipal water wells nearby.

"On a scale we're just a peanut compared to ... Aerojet," Langner said.

But Alpha Explosives is exploring the same kind of treatment technology used at Aerojet. The process involves using bacteria to clean up the chemical.

Nitrates are less exotic groundwater contaminants because they are often found in agricultural areas where ammonium nitrate fertilizer is used.

Long-term exposure to nitrates can cause urinary and spleen disorders.



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